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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000504

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/30/2016  
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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL UNIVERSITY ARMENIAN CONFERENCE: A SMALL  
STEP FORWARD?

REF: 05 ISTANBUL 1680

Classified By: U.S. Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b)  
and (d).

11. (C) Summary: A March 15-17 conference at Istanbul University brought defenders of the official Turkish narrative on the events of 1915-16 together with a handful of more independent voices, including Israeli and Armenian presenters, who openly used the term "Armenian Genocide." The conference -- organized by the former group who argued their views were excluded from last fall's "Alternative Armenian Conference" -- received mixed reviews. Some observers saw nothing new, while others considered this a small step toward increased dialogue and tolerance of diverse views. The publisher of an Armenian-language weekly chose not to participate, but acknowledged that conference organizers were using new language in their approach; he sees an overall "softening" of attitudes. End Summary.

12. (U) Istanbul University (IU) convened a three-day conference March 15-17 to examine "New Approaches in Turkish-Armenian Relations." IU, a state institution, had announced its intent to organize the conference following last September's "Alternative Armenian Conference" hosted by Bilgi University (ref A), claiming the Bilgi conference was one-sided in its omission of speakers supporting official views on the events of 1915-16, and thus not illustrative of true academic freedom.

A Few Independent Voices...

13. (SBU) The conference's opening session featured a presentation by Israeli researcher Yair Auron, who referred to the historical authenticity of the "Armenian Genocide" and called on Turks to re-examine their past; a London-based Armenian researcher, Ara Sarafian, referred to "genocide" on a subsequent day. Moreover, publications outlining Armenian historical claims were reportedly available at the conference hall.

...But Traditional Ones Dominate

14. (SBU) Most of the first days' remarks, however, followed a line more in tune with the official Turkish version of events, for example:

-- Turkish History Institute Chairman Yusuf Halacoglu reportedly told the audience that "Forty million people died during WWI. The total loss of the Ottomans was three million. The number of Armenians who died as a result of attacks was between 6,500 and 8,500."

-- Professor Hikmet Ozdemir of the Turkish History Institute's Armenian Studies Center claimed that 30,000 Turks were killed before February 1915 in skirmishes between Armenian militants and soldiers, prior to any deportations. It was a "big tragedy," he continued, but not a decision made with the aim of the Turkification of Anatolia.

-- Associate Professor Yusuf Sarinay, General Director of the State Archives, asserted that between 1890 and 1914 there were more than 40 revolts by Armenian militants who, because they were not in the majority anywhere, tried to become a majority by killing Muslims or forcing them to migrate.

-- IU Rector Mesut Parlak reportedly equated use of the term "genocide" to political fanaticism.

#### Mixed Assessments

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¶5. (C) In a recent column, Etyen Mahcupyan -- Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) staffer, Radikal newspaper columnist, and participant in the Bilgi conference -- wrote that the IU conference simply parroted official positions, adding that the media and population at large hardly paid attention to the conference because people were fed up with hearing the same old song and dance. Other assessments, while more positive were nonetheless mixed. Professor Israel Charny, who supports claims of genocide and participated on the conference's closing panel, expressed relief at not having been harassed during the event, pleasure at the progress his participation at such a conference represented, and sadness at the "shallowness and intellectual/ethnic bigotry of so many presentations." Several participants in an Armenian issues listserve formed

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after the Bilgi conference agreed that the mere presence at the conference of the five speakers contradicting official views was "something unexpected, even by the ones who invited them."

¶6. (C) Hrant Dink, publisher of the Armenian language newspaper Agos, though listed in the conference program as a panelist, told us March 22 he had decided not to participate after learning that two (Armenian) Turks with whom he did not wish to appear would be at the same event. He also expressed disdain for the "show" made of an Armenian chorus singing the national hymn at the conference's opening. That said, Dink praised the presence of independent voices at the conference, and noted that even some of those espousing the traditional Turkish narrative on the 1915 events were using new and different language, including proposals inviting both sides to "study together."

#### A Softening of Attitudes?

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¶7. (C) Dink also told us Kanal Turk was planning to air the film Ararat in early April, with a panel discussion to follow. The film, which includes claims of genocide and was directed by Atom Egoyan, a Canadian of Armenian origin, caused a stir in 2004, when the Belge Film company backed down from screening it in Turkey, despite GOT offers to deploy police in front of theaters to guarantee security. (Note: We have not been able to independently confirm whether it will be aired. Kanal Turk's website currently shows an on-line survey asking viewers whether or not it should be broadcast and 70 percent of the 8790 respondents to date say "no." End note.)

¶8. (C) Overall, Dink estimates there is a "softening" of attitudes in all quarters, including among diaspora Armenians with whom he visited recently in the United States. He visited a bi-communal group of scholars in Michigan, and challenged them to come to Turkey and do some of the same work here. Dink, who travels often to Europe, claimed that

attitudes of diaspora Armenians in Europe were harsher than those in the U.S. In the U.S., he said, they have one big project each year: the resolution. In Europe, however, they are energized and more "alert" due to Turkey's EU accession process.

Small steps, but in a forward direction...

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19. (C) Comment: That supporters of the genocide allegations were able to participate unmolested in a mainstream academic setting and receive generally straightforward media coverage is a positive development in the public debate on the history of that period. The nuanced change in approach on the part of die-hard genocide denialists, no matter how small, is noteworthy. Hrant Dink's overall optimism and observation that attitudes on all sides are softening is also of interest, particularly given his extensive contact with Armenians in Turkey, the rest of Europe and the United States. End comment.  
JONES